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PROPRIETY AND FINE PERCEPTION:
JAMES'S 'THE EUROPEANS'

Henry James's *The American* (1877) offered an exquisite satire on the mannerlessness of the American. The commonplace hero of that novel was raised to our cultural ideal in the figure of the sudden millionaire. In consequence, the novel aroused both fierce nationalism at home and supercilious amusement abroad. His definition in this novel of the 'national type' so dismayed some of his American reviewers that James reopened the vexed question of international social relations in an essay entitled 'Americans Abroad', published in *The Nation* in October 1878. The point of view James espoused in this essay is identical with that expressed in Emerson's essay 'Manners', namely, that 'defect in manners is usually the defect of fine perceptions'.¹

Commenting on American national self-consciousness in Europe, together with the American's complete unawareness of the impression he produces abroad, James observed:

Americans in Europe are *outsiders*; that is the great point, and the point thrown into relief by all zealous efforts to controvert it. As a people we are out of European society; the fact seems to us incontestable, be it regrettable or not. We are not only out of the European circle politically and geographically; we are out of it socially, and for excellent reasons. We are the only great people of the civilized world that is a pure democracy, and we are the only great people that is exclusively commercial. Add the remoteness represented by these facts to our great and painful geographical remoteness, and it will be easy to see why to be known in Europe as an American is to enjoy an imperfect reciprocity.²

James himself had suffered this 'imperfect reciprocity' from almost the beginning of his European expatriation, having complained that although he had gone 'reeling and moaning thro' the streets' of Rome 'in a fever of enjoyment', he still felt 'how Europe keeps holding one at arm's length': 'Sometimes I am overwhelmed with the pitifulness of this absurd want of reciprocity between Italy itself and all my rhapsodies about it.'³ That Americans *were* outsiders accounts for the frequency with which he came to stage his conflicts, in the later works, between Americans travelling abroad and expatriate Americans who had formed Europeanized colonies. In fact, James's essay 'Americans Abroad' is a reply to an extremely witty article about just such a group. In 'The American Colony in France', which had appeared the previous April in *The Nation*, 'I.M.' (Frederick Sheldon) had observed that too conspicuous on the European scene were American

single ladies who have come to study for prima donnas or for 'general culture', with no visible means of support; married ladies without their husbands (many American families, like their mercantile houses, having branches on this side); widows of the class called *vedova pericolante* in Italy, sometimes alone, sometimes with a daughter pretty, dressy, not bashful, *qui s'habille et babille*; and young girls travelling together without chaperonage or duennage,

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First and Second Series*, edited by Irwin Edman (New York, 1961), p. 360.

² Henry James, 'Americans Abroad', *The Nation*, 27 (3 October 1878), 208–09 (p. 208).

³ HJ to William James, 26 October 1869; HJ to Grace Norton, 14 January 1874, *Henry James: Letters*, edited by Leon Edel, 2–vols (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974–), I, 160, 428.

sans peur and all, of course, *sans reproche*; but no amount of conscious rectitude will get them the respect of other people who are accustomed to draw certain inferences from certain appearances.¹

Although by 1878 he had lived some time in Italy and France, James had been very little exposed to the native aristocracies of Europe. They did not pay him court; the reciprocity had been imperfect. The portrait of the de Bellegardes, in *The American*, was a fraud. He had not understood the aristocrat, as he later conceded in the preface to the New York edition of the novel. Sheldon's essay had the effect of suggesting to James the dramatic possibilities of American colonies abroad, which, in subsequent fiction, he would substitute for the foreign aristocrats, accustomed to drawing certain inferences from certain appearances, whom he did not intimately know. Sheldon's description of the unattended girl abroad and the 'Colonie Américaine' with its 'idle, aimless existence', its tea and gossip, its 'little gradations of rank and its *grandes dames*' who 'unite in sneering at those they call "low Americans"'² is so suggestive a model for Mrs Costello's American colony in Rome that it clearly provoked James to imagine the experience narrated in *Daisy Miller* (1879).

The irritation of Europeanized Americans, in their insular little colonies, is directed at what James in 'Americans Abroad' called the 'profound, imperturbable, unsuspectingness on the part of many Americans of the impression they produce in foreign lands'. He was capable of appreciating American 'naturalness' in behaviour. But he observed that 'it may sometimes provoke a smile, when the impression produced is a good deal at variance with European circumstances'. Of conscious and unconscious Americans in Europe, he remarked:

The great innocence of the usual American tourist is perhaps his most general quality. He takes all sorts of forms, some of them agreeable and some the reverse, and it is probably not unfair to say that by sophisticated Europeans it is harshly interpreted. They waste no time in hair-splitting; they set it down once for all as very vulgar. It may be added that there are a great many cases in which this conclusion hardly seems forced.³

Christopher Newman had been one such case; *Daisy Miller* was about to be another: a conclusion as to their vulgarity seems hardly forced.

But what James's subtle artistry asks us to do is to split hairs on precisely this point: to weigh the unsuspecting innocence of Americans travelling abroad against the conviction of Europeans (and Europeanized Americans) that innocence counts for less than rigid adherence to the custom of the country. And to drive home the point to European readers, he reversed the situation in *An International Episode* (1879), a *nouvelle* in which the 'unsuspectingness' of a pair of Englishmen in America is made the point of his satire.

I

James's intention, in writing *An International Episode*, was more complex than a consideration of it in the light of the exchange of essays in *The Nation* might suggest. In fact, *An International Episode* is partly a response to Laurence Oliphant's

¹ I. M. (Frederick Sheldon), 'The American Colony in France,' *The Nation*, 26 (18 April 1878), 257-59 (p. 258).

² Sheldon, p. 258.

³ 'Americans Abroad,' pp. 208-09.

little satire on American manners in New York City called *The Tender Recollections of Irene Macgillicuddy*, which was serialized in *Blackwoods' Magazine*, published in book form, and reviewed by James for *The Nation* on 30 May 1878. It dealt with what Oliphant believed to be the chief feature of New York fashion, 'the eagerness and energy displayed by marriageable maidens in what is vulgarly called "hooking" a member of the English aristocracy'. James was exasperated with Oliphant's treatment of the *haut monde* of New York, but he felt that *Irene Macgillicuddy* did disclose that 'it is possible, after all, to write tales of "American society"'. He concluded that perhaps there *were* American social types, there was a good deal of local colour, and 'a considerable field for satire'. But why, he asked,

should it be left to the cold and unsympathetic stranger to deal with these things? Why does not native talent take them up — anticipate the sneers of foreign irony, take the wind from its sails and show us, with the force of real familiarity, both the good and the evil that are to be found in Fifth Avenue and on Murray Hill? Are we then so dependent upon foreign labor that it must be left to the English to write even our 'society stories'?¹

Clearly not.

In *An International Episode* James rewrote Oliphant's story from an American viewpoint. The tale comes down to an American girl's rejection of marriage to an English lord. English readers who had taken pleasure in James's satire on the American girl in *Daisy Miller* bristled at this reversal of the expected. Mrs F. H. Hill, whose husband edited the London *Daily News*, protested in print 'against the manners of Lord Lambeth and Mr Percy Beaumont . . . being received as typical of the manners of English gentlemen. As individual characters we take them on their merits and judge them accordingly, but true as types they certainly are not'. She also took occasion to criticize the manners of James's English ladies: 'Perhaps he does not consider that English manners are pretty, and we have no doubt that he has had ample means of judging.'²

This last cut James could not ignore. It insinuated that he had used his entrée into English society to gather material for satire. Having met Mrs Hill in the drawing rooms of London, James broke a long-standing habit of ignoring reviewers and denied to her, in a letter of 21 March 1879, that he had meant to make 'a résumé of my view of English manners. My dear Mrs Hill — the idea is fantastic!'. He defended the accuracy of his characterization of Lord Lambeth and Beaumont, and of his English women he remarked:

The two ladies are a picture of a special case, and they are certainly not an over-charged one. They were very determined their manners should not be nicer; it would have quite defeated the point they wished to make, which was that it didn't at all suit them that a little unknown American girl should marry their coveted kinsman.³

What is extraordinary about James's exchange with Mrs Hill is the intensity of his reaction to her criticism. James's correspondence is often marked by 'the mere twaddle of graciousness', but here he is at white heat: 'One may make figures and figures without intending generalizations — generalizations of which I have a horror. I make a couple of English ladies doing a disagreeable thing — *cela c'est vu*:

¹ Review of *The Tender Recollections of Irene Macgillicuddy*, *The Nation*, 26 (30 May 1878), 357.

² *Daily News*, 21 March 1879, p. 6:4; quoted in Howells Daniels, 'Henry James and "An International Episode"', *Bulletin of the British Association for American Studies*, 1 (1960), 26.

³ *Selected Letters of Henry James*, edited by Leon Edel (London, 1956), p. 106.

excuse me! — and forthwith I find myself responsible for a representation of English manners!' He complained of 'the bother of being an American' when English novelists of manners like Trollope, Thackeray, and Dickens 'were free to draw all sorts of unflattering English pictures, by the thousand. But if I make a single one, I am forthwith in danger of being confronted with a criminal conclusion — and sinister rumours reach me as to what I think of English society'.¹ And he expressed considerable annoyance that English readers like Mrs Hill saw no harm in his pictures of disagreeable Americans, saw in fact a 'natural fitness' in them.

From the violence of his reaction, it is clear that this episode considerably angered James. It also induced in him a great deal of anxiety over the extent to which the English reading public might react negatively to his satiric portraits of them. He feared, in short, the loss of his audience. James told his mother that he had been very delicate; but I shall keep off dangerous ground in future. It is an entirely new sensation for them (the people here) to be (at all delicately) *ironised* or satirised, from the American point of view, and they don't at all relish it. Their conception of the normal in such relation is that the satire should be all on their side against the Americans; and I suspect that if one were to push this a little further one would find that they are extremely sensitive.²

James's desire to defend the American against the European sneer had the effect, then, in *An International Episode*, of risking the loss of his English audience. Yet how to take away from the Oliphants our American 'society stories' without, at the same time, risking the favour of his American audience as well? *The American* and *Daisy Miller* had come dangerously close to that edge. Clearly a balance had to be struck, a perspective had to be achieved, a vantage-point discovered, from which the folly of 'unsuspectingness' in both American and European travellers could be posed. James's conclusion was the neutral ground of cosmopolitanism: it offered much safer footing than the 'dangerous ground' on which he had been standing. In *The Europeans* he found the safe footing he sought.

II

The American, *Daisy Miller*, and *An International Episode* had all, in the failures of the various love matches, veered towards the tragic. (In fact, they are melodramas.) For tragedies, James told his editor William Dean Howells, 'arrest my attention more' and 'say more to my imagination'. But Howells and the public did not want another tale of an 'evaporated marriage',³ another New World defeat at the hands of the Old. Consequently, James promised Howells a four-number hymeneal comedy for the *Atlantic Monthly*, 'a very joyous little romance' set in Boston in the 1830s.

¹ *Selected Letters*, pp. 106–07.

² *The Letters of Henry James*, edited by Percy Lubbock, 2 vols (New York, 1920), 1, 68. Extremely sensitive they certainly were, but no more so than the outraged Americans who could not see the American girl in the portrait of Daisy Miller. As James was to observe, through Captain Lovelock, the next year in *Confidence* (1879): 'You know the Americans are so deucedly thinskinners — they always bristle up if you say anything against their institutions. The English don't care a rap for what you say — they've got a different sort of temper, you know. With the Americans I'm deuced careful — I never breathe a word about anything. While I was over there I went in for being complimentary. I laid it on thick, and I found they would take all I could give them. I didn't see much of their institutions after all; I went in for seeing the people. Some of the people were charming — upon my soul, I was surprised at some of the people' (*Confidence* (London, 1921), pp. 200–01).

³ *Henry James: Letters*, 1, 105

The scenario of this little tale, as James described it to Howells, provides an interesting commentary on his original intentions and suggests how extensively he was to recast *The Europeans* in the actual process of writing it:

I shall probably develop an idea that I have, about a genial, charming youth of a Bohemianish pattern, who comes back from foreign parts into the midst of a mouldering and ascetic old Puritan family of his kindred (some imaginary locality in New England 1830) and by his gayety and sweet audacity smooths out their rugosities, heals their dyspepsia and dissipates their troubles. *All* the women fall in love with him (and he with them — his amatory powers are boundless); but even for a happy ending he can't marry them all. But he marries the prettiest, and from a romantic quality of Christian charity, produces a picturesque imbroglio (for the sake of the picturesque I shall play havoc with the New England background of 1830!) under cover of which the other maidens pair off with the swains who have hitherto been starved out: after which the beneficent cousin departs for Bohemia (*with his bride, oh yes!*) in a vaporous rosy cloud, to scatter new benefactions over man — and especially, woman-kind! — (Pray don't mention this stuff to any one. It would be meant, roughly speaking, as a picture of the conversion of a dusty, dreary domestic circle to epicureanism. But I may be able to make nothing of it. The merit would be in the amount of *color* I should be able to infuse into it.) But I shall give you it, or its equivalent, by November next.¹

What James actually sent Howells was 'its equivalent'; it is a tale considerably different from the story here projected. It comes down to the Baroness Münster, whose 'morganatic' marriage to Prince Adolph of Silberstadt-Schreckenstein is about to be dissolved, and her brother Felix Young, a penniless artist with a magazine commission for an illustrated newspaper, voyaging to America to seek their fortune among their Boston cousins, the Wentworths. Eugenia, the Baroness, hopes to forestall her divorce until she can secure a rich husband in America. Robert Acton almost proposes marriage to her, but does not, and she returns to Europe to hold the Prince to his vows. Felix, however, wins the hand of Gertrude, and the novel concludes with their marriage and three others as well: her sister Charlotte's marriage to the Unitarian minister Mr Brand; her brother Clifford Wentworth's marriage to Lizzie, Robert Acton's sister; and Acton's reported marriage to 'a particularly nice young girl'.²

As described in the scenario, the novel was to have contrasted epicureanism and puritanism. But the new tale became instead what James called a 'study' of the differences between cultural thinness and thickness; between spontaneity and the inhibitions produced by a rigid moral code; between openness to the opportunities of life and a narrow sense of duty; between the bright and the grey view of life. As embodied, the contrasts inhere in the opposition between Europe and America; between Felix and Eugenia; and between Gertrude and the Wentworths. The change in intention arose from the unresolved issues we have traced in James's previous essays and novels, with respect to the 'unsuspectingness' of the foreigner seeking to 'hook' a well-placed mate. It also grew out of James's analysis of the social conditions of 'provincial' New England in the 1830s and 1840s, as he researched the American Notebooks for his biography *Hawthorne* (1879).

Even so, the full contrast fails to balance. *The Europeans* is set wholly in Boston and its rural environs; there are no complementary pictures of European life. It is largely in Eugenia that the richness of Old World culture and the complexity of

¹ Henry James: *Letters*, I, 106.

² Henry James, *The Europeans* (London, 1921), p. 209. Hereafter, page numbers will be included in parentheses in the text after the quotation.

its social existence are suggested. If the American landscape 'seemed to be all foreground' and the 'foreground . . . inferior to the *plans reculés*', Europe is only by implication more picturesque, the 'middle distance' setting off the further ranges. If the public coachmen in Boston wear straw hats, we are reminded in passing that 'at Silberstadt Madame Münster had had liveries of yellow and crimson' (p. 37). If Boston reminded her of 'a fair in a provincial town', she 'found herself alternately smiling and shrinking' (pp. 12–13). American manners are conspicuous by their general absence. To Eugenia it is 'anomalous' that 'at the hour at which ladies should come out for an airing and stroll past a hedge of pedestrians, holding their parasols askance', there are 'no indications of this custom' in Boston (p. 13). Felix tells Eugenia that the Wentworth style has 'the *ton* of the golden age' (p. 35), but she wishes to know whether they have nothing golden but their *ton*. This reminds us of Christof Wegelin's observation that if New England is a place where morality is flaunted and wealth concealed, in Europe the reverse is true.

Mr Wentworth and his family are convinced that 'this country is superior in many respects' to England and Holland (p. 242), and if Eugenia is the wife of a prince, Mr Wentworth is satisfied to observe that 'we are all princes here' (p. 52). Yet New England life is bare, colourless, and lacking in romance (Gertrude has sought escape in the *Arabian Nights* when Felix mysteriously materializes before her), while Europe is by implication rich in picturesque colours softened by the passage of time. Felix holds her enthralled with gay tales of having played with a band of provincial musicians and performed in a troupe of strolling actors. His account of his European life transports her into 'a fantastic world; she seemed to herself to be reading a romance that came out in daily numbers' (p. 8). Imagining the world that Hawthorne must have known, James creates a family of New Englanders who lack the forms of civilized existence. They do not know how to take compliments, for example, except with the silence 'of modesty and expectation'. The behaviour of the Europeans, however, is marked by the civility and *politesse* of an old civilization. They are smooth.

But it would be a mistake to assume that in *The Europeans* James wholly abandoned his gentle 'ironisation' of Europeans so as to avoid losing his audience abroad. Nor is his point the safer ridicule of American cultural thinness, which had got him into trouble at home. Setting the novel in a remote and bygone era, transposing it into an historical romance, partly delivered him from the ire of contemporary critics who would defend the current state of the American culture. *The Europeans* does not fully enlist our sympathies with one side or the other. When James wrote to his mother of moving to safer ground, he meant the high ground of cosmopolitanism, from which those damaging charges of nationalism could not be heard. No, indeed. To oversimplify in such a way is to make the mistake of the critic who claimed that the ideal of 'concentrated patriotism'¹ which led James to write *The American* was 'still burning with white intensity when he produced *The Europeans*' so that the result was a novel in which 'a pair of "corrupt" Europeans, brother and sister, are immersed in an American experience, purifying in inverse ratio to their "cosmopolitanism"'.² Nothing could be further from the truth. At

¹ Henry James, 'Occasional Paris' (1877), *Portraits of Places* (London, 1883), p. 75.

² Oscar Cargill, *The Novels of Henry James* (New York, 1961), p. 62.

least two considerations need to be examined if we are to understand the complexity of James's treatment of the international theme in this work: the 'Europeanism' of Eugenia and Felix; and the differences in their ways of looking at life.

III

Eugenia and Felix are not identified with any specific country. Both are totally deracinated from any *patria* or native land. They are children of Americans; their father was born in Sicily, but of American parents; their mother was a Bostonian. Felix was born in France, Eugenia in Vienna. Felix, in fact, admits to having lived in 'every city in Europe' (p. 28). They are nephew and niece of Mr Wentworth, and their American connexion constitutes the basis for their visit to Boston. It is not merely because James needs a motive to get them to Boston that he makes them the children of Americans. That they are the children of 'Europeanized Americans' constitutes the significant element in James's obfuscation of their national origins. Their Europeanness is not of a provincial variety. T. S. Eliot once observed that 'it is the final perfection, the consummation of an American, to become, not an Englishman, but a European — something which no born European, no person of any European nationality, can become'.¹ The Europeanizing process requires the deliberate abandonment of attitudes, values, and manners that are distinctively national to the countries where they originate: France, England, Italy, and so on. It requires, in other words, the erasure from one's character and conduct of whatever might conceivably be called provincial. (Provincialism, it is well to remember, was, according to James, Hawthorne's principal attribute. This remark led the critic Wentworth Higginson, conceivably the model for Mr Wentworth, to retort that American literature needed more such provincial writers.)² 'If you have lived about', James wrote in the same year that *The Europeans* was published,

you have lost that sense of the absoluteness and the sanctity of the habits of your fellow-patriots which once made you so happy in the midst of them. You have seen that there are a great many *patriae* in the world and that each of these is filled with excellent people for whom the local idiosyncrasies are the only thing that is not rather barbarous. There comes a time when one set of customs, wherever it may be found, grows to seem to you about as provincial as another.³

James's preoccupation, in this passage and in the novels of this period, is with the conflict which arises when Americans encounter incomprehensible European customs, reject them, or imperfectly assimilate them; and when 'Europeanized Americans' return to a provincial America incapable of appreciating their denationalized Old World manners. 'You are a foreigner of some sort', says Gertrude, trying to fix Felix's identity more specifically. But James is not interested in our understanding Felix or Eugenia in terms of a national provincialism; he wishes us to understand them as simply foreign, foreign to Boston, as intruders with a disturbing and differing view of the world. In this sense 'Europe' constitutes a

¹ T. S. Eliot, 'On Henry James', in *The Question of Henry James*, edited by F. W. Dupee (New York, 1945), p. 109.

² Wentworth Higginson so consistently criticized James's preference for European social forms, in reviews and essays, that James complained to Howells that the 'Higginsonian fangs' had bespattered his 'gore' throughout the pages of American periodicals.

³ *Portraits of Places*, pp. 75-76.

metaphor for the romance of the strange and far away, the rich and ambiguous, the mysterious and indefinite: 'Of some sort — yes; I suppose so. But who can say of what sort? I don't think we have ever had occasion to settle the question. You know there are people like that. About their country, their religion, their profession, they can't tell' (p. 28). The Europeanness of these two strangers prevents us from establishing a provincial identity for them as French, German, or Italian. James's technique is thus a way of reinforcing the mystery of personality, one of the principal themes in Hawthorne's best work, as James remarked in his biography. Hawthorne, James observed there, cared for the deeper psychology.

Both Eugenia and Felix, who suddenly and mysteriously appear before the Wentworths, seek their fortunes, one literally and the other figuratively. In the contrast between them James not only establishes the relationship between fineness of manners and fineness of perception but also embodies in Felix the proper norm of social and moral conduct, as he understood it.

It is surprising, then, that so acute a critic as Richard Poirier has argued vigorously for the centrality of Eugenia in *The Europeans*. He observes that her exclusion from the Wentworth society at the end of the novel, far from being a just and satisfying defeat of her selfish calculations, is a trenchant criticism of the angularity and insularity of a society that cannot assimilate her.¹ Eugenia is without question an intelligent and stylish addition to the unadorned circle of the Wentworths. But, at the same time, to emphasize her story so much is to neglect the moral dimension in James's drama of 'finely mingled motives'. The meaning of her 'rejection' (it should be remarked that in fact she returns to Europe voluntarily) can only be clarified by discriminating between her view of the relation between morals and manners and that of her brother.

IV

Eugenia has come to America to size up her cousins, to estimate, in terms of their wealth, her chance to make a better situation for herself if her morganatic marriage fails. She is ambitious, even cynical in the candour with which she weighs the Wentworths in the future she plans for herself. Felix too has come in search of his fortune, but for him fortune is a metaphor for the wealth that experience brings. Eugenia insists on the Wentworths' being rich; that is all that she insists on. Felix agrees that it will be pleasanter if they are rich, but he counts upon their being 'powerful, and clever, and friendly, and elegant, and interesting, and generally delightful!' (p. 11). If Eugenia has an eye to the main chance, Felix has his eyes open to bright possibilities of every kind. He has accompanied Eugenia to America, at her suggestion, in search of opportunities for enlarged consciousness, freely receptive to impressions and experiences as they open up before him.

Felix does a good deal of clowning, which continually exasperates the Baroness, and to some readers he has seemed a light vehicle for the serious statement about manners and morals which James intended him to communicate. Full of high spirits and comic wit, he is often called frivolous and consents so to be described. But the vocabulary of those who characterize him in this way is inadequate to account for Felix's sense of delight: he finds life worth living. If Eugenia thinks of America as

¹ Richard Poirier, *The Comic Sense of Henry James* (New York, 1967), p. 123.

'horrible', Felix thinks it 'comical', 'delightful', 'charming'. If she thinks American girls too visible in public, too bold, and devoid of polite manners, he cannot see too much of them, is charmed by their loveliness, and thinks them 'just right'. The difference between their conceptions of the world and between their attitudes towards the 'proprieties' is rather like that between Urbane and Valentin de Bellegarde in *The American*, and James's rhetorical strategy always is to manipulate the reader's sympathies in favour of Felix.

The spectacle of Eugenia's attempt to adapt herself to the Wentworth society is rich in wit; it cuts both ways, James 'ironising' the calculated artifice she employs as well as the studied plainness of New England social life, which renders her arts ineffectual. Her behaviour is an utter enigma to everyone. That Mr Wentworth 'was paralyzed and bewildered by her foreignness' (p. 265) is a measure of the dazzling figure she cuts in her new situation. The absence of any basis for comparison in estimating her gives Eugenia 'a feeling of almost illimitable power' (p. 261), and she permits herself an extravagance of style stupefying to the Wentworth household. She decorates the cottage which Mr Wentworth gives her with *portières* suspended in doorways, wax candles distributed about in unexpected places, and 'anomalous draperies' disposed over the arms of sofas and backs of chairs. Charlotte and Gertrude are bewildered by Eugenia's 'copious provision of the element of costume': 'India shawls suspended, curtain-wise, in the parlor door, and curious fabrics, corresponding to Gertrude's metaphysical vision of an opera-cloak, tumbled about in the sitting places' (p. 59). The effect of so 'obtrusive' a 'distribution of her wardrobe' almost provokes Charlotte to offer to help Eugenia to 'put her superfluous draperies away'. But on Gertrude the effect of Eugenia's 'most ingenious', 'most romantic intention' is to awaken her to the charm of conscious art as a means of enriching an otherwise colourless existence. "'What is life, indeed, without curtains?" she secretly asked herself', and James comically remarks of her dawning perception that she had been 'leading hitherto an existence singularly garish and totally devoid of festoons' (p. 60). What is significant here is not the actual properties of Eugenia's scenic design — indeed, the India shawl, the curious fabrics, and the 'remarkable band of velvet, covered with coarse, dirty-looking lace' (p. 59) are actually rather pathetic counters in Eugenia's closet of stage props. What is significant is Gertrude's awakening 'metaphysical vision', her perception (it is an insight of the imagination) of the meaning of Eugenia's refinement of nature, her rearrangement of the world in terms of artful design, a response to life which James nearly always associates with Europe. (This association is evident, for example, in Mary Garland's having been 'brought up to think a great deal of "nature" and nature's innocent laws', in *Roderick Hudson*, only to discover, through Rowland Mallet's instruction, 'the need of man's spirit to refine upon them', a discovery that produces in Mary, as well as in Gertrude, 'a well-high tragic tension'.¹

This tension involving nature and art provoked by Eugenia's flamboyant style also reminds us of the effect on Christopher Newman of the exquisite manners of Claire de Cintré, whom Eugenia, at her most refined, resembles. Newman wonders where Claire's good manners end and her sincerity begins. Can the art of social

¹ Henry James, *Roderick Hudson* (New York, 1907), pp. 343–44.

expression, polite manners, be an instrument of insincerity? Newman worries about it.

Although the reader never doubts the perfect correspondence, in *The American*, between Claire's inner intention and the outward form of her manners, the Wentworths are rightly troubled about Eugenia. She is bored; she is manifestly irritated at a manner of life so unadorned that it provides her no materials to work with. But Gertrude's awakening instinct for the difference between Eugenia's social and their moral reality allows her to interpret Eugenia to her baffled cousins. Gertrude's first discovery occurs at the moment of their introduction, when Eugenia remarks on the Wentworth girls' 'handsomeness'. This compliment pleases Gertrude, though she cannot say why, for she knows it to be untrue. Later she perceives that flattery has been employed; however 'untrue', it creates beneficence, a good feeling which can never be actualized in the airless atmosphere of absolute truth.

Eugenia acts unconsciously and unsuspectingly on the assumed value of flattery, and it comes as an irritating surprise to her that these Americans do not also recognize the value, even the necessity, as one of the graces of civilized living, of an occasional fib spoken with a fine intention. When Robert Acton introduces her to his mother, an invalid steeped in the high-minded essays of Emerson, Eugenia declares that Robert has told her a great deal about his mother: 'Oh, he talks of you as you would like, . . . as such a son *must* talk of such a mother!' The remark is a graceful one; it is meant to please. But it simply is not true. Acton has never even mentioned his mother:

Mrs. Acton sat gazing; this was part of Madame Münster's 'manner'. But Robert Acton was gazing too, in vivid consciousness that he had barely mentioned his mother to their brilliant guest. He never talked of this still maternal presence — a presence refined to such delicacy that it had almost resolved itself, with him, simply into the subjective emotion of gratitude. And Acton rarely talked of his emotions. The Baroness turned her smile toward him, and she instantly felt that she had been observed to be fibbing. She had struck a false note. But who were these people to whom such fibbing was not pleasing? If they were annoyed, the Baroness was equally so; and after the exchange of a few civil inquiries and low-voiced responses she took leave of Mrs. Acton. (pp. 99–100)

In this passage one may observe James's double point of view. He sympathizes with both positions. To Mrs Acton, who knows that her son is not the kind to speak gracefully about his mother, Eugenia's flattery has passed over into mendacity. But the passage also implies a judgement on a society so absolutist in its respect for 'truth' that graceful but meaningless civilities are unacceptable. It is one of those many instances in the novel where a conflict arises 'between people who believe in manners and artfulness, which often pass for deception, and those who are suspicious of them'.¹ In so far as the angular puritan community cannot appreciate the good intention beneath the slight prevarication, James directs our sympathies to Eugenia. But why her art does not count for much in Boston deserves fuller consideration, particularly in the light of Poirier's claim that 'at the end of the novel James's compassion and admiration are given more to Eugenia than to her American friends'.²

To the extent that Eugenia may rectify what James believed to be an active deficiency in the culture of New England, she is a positive force in the novel.

¹ Poirier, p. 115.

² Poirier, p. 144.

She brings colour, civility, charm, and conscious art to a community that is plain, dull, and barren of sophistication and grace. Or rather, she can have this effect if she wishes to. But Eugenia's manners are often used to conceal her true feelings. Even worse, her studied politeness is often intended to be impolite, suggesting a failure of feeling on her part, 'a defect of fine perceptions', a radical incapacity to sympathize with the condition of a foreign society into which she herself is the intruder. This is clear in the perplexity of the Wentworth girls over how 'to show all proper attention to Madame Münster' without, at the same time, being intrusive. These untutored American girls show a nice perception of the problem of whether or not to visit the distinguished guest living across the road. Eugenia has no such reciprocal perception of the significance of American customs, like that of 'dropping in': "One goes into your house as into an inn — except that there are no servants rushing forward", she said to Charlotte. And she added that that was very charming. Gertrude explained to her sister that she meant just the reverse; she didn't like it at all.' Gertrude gradually grows conscious of Eugenia's trick of the insulting remark balanced by the insincere compliment. Without any knowledge of the world, however, they have no way of penetrating to the real significance of Eugenia's attitudes. 'Charlotte inquired why she should tell an untruth, and Gertrude answered that there was probably some very good reason for it which they should discover when they knew her better. "There can surely be no good reason for telling an untruth", said Charlotte. "I hope she does not think so"' (p. 64).

In general, Eugenia's imperial manners on occasions like this are meant to express by indirection an upper-class derogation of a provincial style felt to be *infra dignitatem*. Her behaviour is a means of holding the Wentworth girls at arm's length, of preventing intimacy, of asserting (through irony) her intellectual superiority, of preventing them from understanding her even while she is irritated at not being perfectly understood. In this sense, one may agree with Poirier that Eugenia's manners constitute the means by which the Baroness protects her 'own inner freedom'. But it is not clear in what sense her manners 'allow others the least difficulty and the least fear in fully expressing themselves'.¹ The opposite is true: Eugenia's strategy prevents the Wentworths from fully expressing their wish for a nearer relation to so distinguished a guest, of yielding to the very *voix du sang* which Eugenia has invoked in throwing herself on the charity of her American cousins. As James observes through Marcellus Cockerel in 'The Point of View' (1882), 'As for manners, there are bad manners everywhere, but an aristocracy is bad manners organized. (I don't mean that they may not be polite among themselves, but they are rude to every one else.)'² In his search for 'reciprocity', the novelist had personally suffered that rudeness. In this novel, he gets, with Eugenia, his innings.

Eugenia fails to make her fortune in the New World because, for all her potential for graceful conduct, she is not above using her social arts to realize a doubtful matrimonial ambition. Robert Acton declines to propose because he fears that she is not fully honest, that her gift for the polite fib conceals something more deeply

¹ Poirier, p. 115.

² Henry James, 'The Point of View,' *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, edited by Leon Edel, 12 vols (London, 1962-64), IV, 515.

deceitful. His intuition is accurate. For she tells Acton that she has renounced her marriage (and by implication is therefore free to accept his proposal), while she tells Felix that she has not done so. It is not possible for the reader to know which of these statements is the truth; and it probably does not matter. But it is inescapably true that Eugenia is lying to one of them and, whichever it is, the lie is too serious to warrant her enjoying our full esteem.

In fact, James's handling of the point of view, so sophisticated and self-effacing in the later novels, is nowhere more intrusive than in his directing us to a negative response, even while he seeks to soften the judgement which must be made upon Eugenia's cynical opportunism:

As I have had the honor of intimating, she had come four thousand miles to seek her fortune; and it is not to be supposed that after this great effort she could neglect any apparent aid to advancement. It is my misfortune that in attempting to describe in a short compass the deportment of this remarkable woman I am obliged to express things rather brutally. I feel this to be the case, for instance, when I say that she had primarily detected such an aid to advancement in the person of Robert Acton, but that she had afterwards remembered that a prudent archer always has a second bowstring. (p. 129)

Clifford Wentworth, the callow son who has been rusticated from Harvard for drinking, is Eugenia's conception of a second bowstring. In her final breach of good faith, if not taste, she undertakes to make Clifford, the heir to the Wentworth fortune, fall in love with her — under the pretext of civilizing him, of giving him a set of polite manners. In presenting Eugenia's motivation in this case, James is extraordinarily subtle; he is under the difficult obligation of making her motive clear without suggesting that she is vulgar, of putting us in possession of essential fact without, at the same time, suggesting that this remarkable woman is disgusting:

Eugenia was a woman of finely-mingled motive, and her intentions were never sensibly gross. She had a sort of esthetic ideal for Clifford which seemed to her a disinterested reason for taking him in hand. It was very well for a fresh-colored young gentleman to be ingenuous; but Clifford, really, was crude. With such a pretty face he ought to have prettier manners. She would teach him that, with a beautiful name, the expectation of a large property, and, as they said in Europe, a social position, an only son should know how to carry himself. (p. 129)

It is part of the beauty of James's characterization that while Eugenia *is* an adventuress, we cannot call her simply that. While she does scheme at 'hooking' young Clifford (she is thirty-three), she yet has a disinterested social ideal which, in any case, is worth his realizing.

The fullness of James's characterization of Eugenia thus prevents the novel from becoming the sinister melodrama that it otherwise might be. Nevertheless, she fails, even at hooking Clifford. Why she should have regarded her expedition to America a failure, James observes with a fine irony, is not exactly apparent, since 'she had been treated with the highest distinction for which allowance had been made in American institutions'. But under the circumstances her social powers, in the severely truthful democratic milieu, are ineffectual; and she chooses to return to the Old World. Her irritation, James observed, came at bottom from the sense

that the social soil on this big, vague continent was somehow not adapted for growing those plants whose fragrance she especially inclined to inhale and by which she liked to see herself surrounded — a species of vegetation for which she carried a collection of seedlings, as we may say, in her pocket. She found her chief happiness in the sense of exerting a certain power and making a certain impression; and now she felt the annoyance of a rather wearied

swimmer who, on nearing shore, to land, finds a smooth straight wall of rock when he had counted upon a clean firm beach. Her power, in the American air, seemed to have lost its prehensile attributes; the smooth wall of rock was insurmountable. (pp. 154-55)

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If for Eugenia the American shore represents a solid rock wall, for Felix it is a smooth sandy beach leading up to a spacious sunny house of charming hospitality. He is hardly the amorous figure that James sketched in the scenario, but he is charming, gracious, good-tempered, and generous. In the dialectic of the novel's concern with conduct and values, Felix Young immediately suggests both youth and happiness. In this we have a vestige of the Hawthornean technique; our readiness to accept its allegorical genre will make Felix's didactic function much more accessible. Felix has a vivid moral sense, he joyfully affirms life (here Hawthorne's gloom is turned on its head), and he has a sophisticated and adaptable mode of behaviour. These qualities create a paradigm of the ideal relation, as James understood it, between manners and morals. James's characterization of Felix thus constitutes, in its way, an antithesis to that of Eugenia:

Never was a nature more perfectly fortunate. It was not a restless, apprehensive, ambitious spirit, running a race with the tyranny of fate, but a temper so unsuspecting as to put Adversity off her guard, dodging and evading her with the easy, natural motion of a wind-shifted flower. Felix extracted entertainment from all things, and all his faculties — his imagination, his intelligence, his affections, his senses — had a hand in the game. (p. 60)

He is innocent of precisely those 'moral lapses' and 'social oversights' that alienate the community from Eugenia. If it is he who suggests, for instance, that Eugenia civilize Clifford Wentworth, Felix is manifestly preoccupied with 'the work of redemption'. He is certainly not prepared for the construction Eugenia places on his suggestion, and the idea of her trying to ensnare Clifford in *matrimony* suddenly looms before him: 'The idea in prospect had seemed of the happiest, but in operation it made him a trifle uneasy. "What if Eugenia — what if Eugenia" — he asked himself softly; the question dying away in his sense of Eugenia's undetermined capacity' (p. 111). The worst that we can say of Felix is that he has an insufficient appreciation of the capacity of human beings for what Hawthorne called the bosom serpent of egotism.

Yet it is Felix who first begins to wake Gertrude from the trance she has been in, to open her up to the delight of self-knowledge, to the naturalness of being herself. It is Felix who guides Mr Brand to a conscious recognition that he really loves and ought to marry Charlotte, not Gertrude. And it is Felix who reveals to Mr Wentworth the secret that joy and a sense of duty may co-exist harmoniously. This is manifestly illustrated in Felix's discreet courtship. He knows that to take advantage of his position as a guest in the home of his uncle, in order to make love to Gertrude, would be a breach of good conduct. For this reason he behaves towards her with extraordinary circumspection; this is in utter contrast to the hooking Eugenia. When he can no longer resist declaring his love, he approaches Gertrude's father to ask for her hand and to apologize for his impropriety. His interview with Mr Wentworth is one of the most scintillating bits of social comedy in the novel, particularly in Felix's gay attempt to absolve himself of his presuming to court her:

'Have you never suspected it, dear uncle?' Felix inquired. 'Well that proves how discreet I have been. Yes, I thought you wouldn't like it.'

'It is very serious, Felix', said Mr. Wentworth.

'You think it's an abuse of hospitality!' exclaimed Felix, smiling again.

'Of hospitality? — an abuse?' his uncle repeated very slowly.

'That is what Felix said to me', said Charlotte, conscientiously.

'Of course you think so; don't defend yourself!' Felix pursued. 'It is an abuse, obviously; the most I can claim is that it is perhaps a pardonable one. I simply fell head over heels in love; one can hardly help that . . .' (p. 192)

Felix's belief that he has been guilty of bad manners is utterly lost on Mr Wentworth, who is fixated on the moral gravity of a marriage proposal. He is incapable of understanding Felix's unexpected proposal in the light of the postulated social offence he is supposed to have felt.

The marriage of Felix and Gertrude resolves, as F. W. Dupee has observed, a potentially disastrous situation in the Wentworth household.¹ For at the beginning of the narrative Gertrude is on the brink of a profound rebellion against her puritanical world for reasons which she cannot understand. In Felix's educating Gertrude to a totally new way of looking at life, one of the happiest configurations of the plot is achieved. It grows out of Felix's definition of the distinctive defect of New England society: 'There is something the matter with them; they have some melancholy memory or some depressing expectation' (p. 35). He wishes that 'they were not all so sad' (p. 63). He tells Gertrude that he believes them to be too unhappy and to take 'a painful view of life, as one may say' (p. 77). He adjures her to enjoy life, which may be considerably different from giving parties, going to the theatre, reading novels, and keeping late hours, her naive view of 'enjoying oneself'.

'I don't think it's what one does or doesn't do that promotes enjoyment', her companion answered. 'It is the general way of looking at life.'

'They look at it as a discipline — that's what they do here. I have often been told that'.

'Well, that's very good. But there is another way', added Felix, smiling: 'to look at it as an opportunity.'

'An opportunity — yes', said Gertrude. 'One would get more pleasure that way.' (p. 78)

This conversation constitutes the turning point in Gertrude's moral transformation. It frees her to be herself, to express freely her love of the strange, the mysterious, the formal, and the decorative. The Wentworths had described her as 'frivolous'; but 'spontaneous' or 'natural' might be a more just term. Her new perception leads Gertrude far beyond the Reverend Mr Brand, who tries to get her back on to what he believes is the straight and narrow. (In his attempt to manipulate her life he is clearly one of Hawthorne's Ethan Brand figures.) To him she cries out passionately:

'I am trying for once to be natural! . . . I have been pretending, all my life; I have been dishonest; it is you that have made me so!' Mr. Brand stood gazing at her, and she went on, 'Why shouldn't I be frivolous, if I want! One has a right to be frivolous, if it's one's nature. No I don't care for the great questions. I care for pleasure — for amusement. Perhaps I am fond of wicked things; it is very possible!' (pp. 123–24)

In this case we are doubtless meant to interpret Gertrude's final remark in the light of Mr Brand's very great provocation. Gertrude, a good girl, is hardly about to

¹ F. W. Dupee, *Henry James* (New York, 1951), p. 102.

scuttle down the road to perdition, although it is pertinent to remark that Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' had conceded that the self to be actualized might turn out to be evil. Though Gertrude may come to 'live for pleasure' and be fond of 'wicked things', it is not probable. For among the forms of beauty adored by Felix, who has awakened her, is what he calls 'the beauty of virtue'.

The Europeans thus dramatizes the triumph of Felix Young's view of life as an opportunity to be actualized and refined through the artifice of elaborate form, and to be enjoyed for the intricate moral and social arrangements which constitute its beauty. Though Felix is gaily idealized and constitutes an allegorical type, he serves as the necessary foil both to the 'unsuspecting' Baroness, in his union of cosmopolitan social grace *and* moral sensitivity; and to the Wentworths, in his commitment to spontaneity, amusement, and the natural self. R. P. Blackmur once unaccountably said that since *The Europeans* suggested 'no overmastering theme, no vision or psychology of life', and 'no great shaping power of artistic form, in the technical sense', it need not 'be read for anything but pleasure'.¹ Compared with the works of the 'major phase', *The Europeans* is a light performance, a gracile tribute to our greatest romancer. Yet it is one of the most serious of the early comedies of manners, as well as a pleasure to read. As a tale of 'American society', it finds the sought-for local 'field for satire' and, by dint of 'native talent', reflects 'the force of real familiarity'. It balances, in a unique way, the strengths and limitations of a safely denationalized European culture, offensive to no specific audience. And it gently exposes to purifying ridicule the too-serious moralism, still vestigial, of old New England's plain living and high thinking. In doing so, it finds the field of satire to be the high, safe ground of cosmopolitanism.

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¹ R. P. Blackmur, 'Introduction', *Washington Square and 'The Europeans'* (New York, 1959), p. 5.